

Manufacturing Consent and Plato's Republic

1. Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to draw attention to conceptual similarities between two important texts in the history of political philosophy, Plato's *Republic* and Noam Chomsky's and Edward S. Herman's work, *Manufacturing Consent*. Similar to the way the "propaganda model," which Chomsky and Herman describe as a phenomenon by which "news media" is used as a means to transmitting false ideas, the method described by Socrates in the *Republic*, where poetry is used as a means to transmit false ideas is not entirely different. Furthermore, those who transmit false ideas under such conditions do so automatically, consciously or not, because they've internalized certain values, which lead to an *automatic rule* and certain political order. I will also employ the concepts of "harmful propaganda" and "flawed ideologies" that Jason Stanley outlines in *How Propaganda Works*, and show that these concepts are either identical or closely related to the problem of manufacturing consent, amongst others.

In the following section I will outline and compare and contrast several concepts to support the thesis above. Finally, in §3, before concluding, I will briefly discuss how the phenomenon characterized by these concepts emerged within the cultures of Ancient Greece and the United States.

2.1 Automatic Rule

In the society that Socrates describes in the *Republic*, the rulers must devise and perpetuate certain falsities that will lead the public to believe that the hierarchical society in which they live is

“natural” (414b-c; 459c). Furthermore, if the public is taught to believe certain “noble lies,” then the political system may operate automatically, over generations (415d). Slaves will be taught that they were naturally born to be slaves, for instance, while merchants, artisans, the Guardians, and Philosopher Kings will have been taught that they were born to be who they are, the wise kings will ensure it.

Under such a system, certain values will generally be shared and accepted by all of society. The shared values and beliefs act as a bond that preserves the political order pan-generationally. This creates a *positive-feedback loop of false ideology*, however. In 1576, *The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude* was penned by French Judge and political theorist, Etienne de la Boétie, who was perplexed by the phenomenon of “voluntary servitude.” “It is hard to believe that there is anything of common wealth in a country where everything belongs to one master.” By “master,” Boétie is not so much concerned with the concept of single ruler, but of minority rule over a majority. “I should like merely to understand how it happens that so many men, so many villages, so many cities, so many nations, sometimes suffer under a single tyrant who has no other power than the power they give him; who is able to harm them only to the extent to which they have the willingness to bear with him; who could do them absolutely no injury unless they preferred to put up with him rather than contradict him.” For the sake of the theory put forth here, “him” or “ruler,” may be thought synonymous with “minority rule” in any form. The idea that one form of rule is less evil than another would be incomprehensible to the servant who has no idea that the rulers had changed over the years, their subjugation remains unchanged. Furthermore, their children may be subjected to the same condition. Without having knowledge of the nature of the consequences of the political order in which they find themselves, they cannot be fully conscious of the problem of

their subjugation. It is conceivable that such a phenomenon generalizes throughout the hierarchies and social classifications of contemporary political orders.

David Hume was also amazed by the ease at which a relative few were let to rule over a countless, seemingly willing many. “Nothing is more surprising to those who consider human affairs with a philosophical eye, than to see the easiness with which the many are governed by the few, and to observe the implicit submission with which men resign their own sentiments and passions to those of their rulers” (Hume p. 32). Hume reasoned that the phenomenon relied on the forming of public opinion, effectively, the manufacturing of their consent to be ruled. The consent is manufactured; and the *material used is ideological*. The mind or soul is captured by the rulers, for their use, and for the sake of their ends, namely, the generation and maintenance of a disproportionate share of wealth and power. For this to be possible, virtually all of those ruled over must value similar things so as to bond them in the service of the “opulent minority.” This does not mean they value everything in the same way, but only those things fundamental to the substrate of the political order. Everyone in a political system, for instance, may be taught to “love their country” and to put it before themselves. This is why it has often been framed as a duty for a country to send their youth to die on the battlefields, for the good of the society or state. Finally, it need not be necessary that all believe in the myths that benefit few, for the majority will ensure that the order is maintained, and that the traditions and norms they’ve been taught to value are protected from those seeking radical changes to the existing order.

2.2 Value Internalization

Every society has in place mechanisms for sustaining and maintaining certain traditions and norms. Traditions are tied to values widely held throughout society. Chomsky suggests that certain values

are *internalized* by individuals and are thus beyond the purview of introspection, which creates a system for automatically filtering certain values:

The elite domination of the media and marginalization of dissidents that results from the operation of these filters occurs so naturally that media news people, frequently operating with complete integrity and goodwill, are able to convince themselves that they choose and interpret the news ‘objectively’ and on the basis of professional news values. (Chomsky 2)

The United States, for example, is widely professed to be a “free society” that values freedom of speech. US leaders do not frequently imprison or kill journalists for contradicting statements that fail to align with those made by the state, for example. Chomsky and Herman find that *physical* force isn’t always necessary in a Liberal Democracy such as the United States, because those responsible for reporting the news have internalized the values that ultimately serve to maintain a political order that serves *wealth and power* or “the ruling class.” Those tasked with the responsibility for disseminating “news” and other information, such as “education,” conform, automatically, without the need of police batons. This is not to say that the state does not use physical force to maintain the existing order, even Plato’s Utopia called for force “as needed,” but only that there are other means to get people to do “voluntarily” what may be, ultimately, against their interests.

Socrates compares this phenomenon to the process of dyeing wool. Those who are properly educated “would absorb the laws...like dye, so that their belief about what they should fear and all the rest would” resist being washed-out by any other feelings that might cause them to question

what they've been led to believe" (430a-b, my emphasis). Socrates' metaphor describes the mechanism of control that Chomsky lays out concerning the internalization of values, which enables the public's consent to be "manufactured." The process of manufacturing the public's consent requires internalization of values, which form networks of interconnecting ideas that constitute ideologies. To understand how a society's ideological networks are manufactured, I turn to Jason Stanley's concepts of "harmful propaganda" and "flawed ideologies."

2.3 Flawed Ideologies and Harmful Propaganda

For the sake of this discussion, let us say that an ideology may be characterized by "a record of expectations of various goods built out of regularities of convention. They are the beliefs that unreflectively guide our path through the social world" (184, Haslanger, Shelby). If one expects that when they go to the grocery store they will be able to purchase food, they expect a certain political order to be in place, namely, that which they have in mind. The mechanisms that make it possible or "regularities of convention." Stories about what "regularities of convention" are and who benefits from them and who does not, however, vary widely. Conservatives and liberals often have opposite conceptions of reality. Their epistemological and metaphysical understanding of reality can diverge greatly, yet both miss the complete truth, which leads to the second part of the above quotation, the phenomenon of a persistent lack of reflectivity on one's own false beliefs about *their* own understanding, which fail to accord with reality. This will "characteristically lead one to sincerely hold a belief that is false and that, because of its falsity, disrupts the rational evaluation of a policy proposal" (46). The political party in a sense, then, becomes "Truth." If one holds that conservatism or liberalism *is* the path to truth, then attempts to point out contradictions or false claims will be met with contempt and either denied or ignored altogether. This explains

why conservatives and liberals alike are often forced to hold their noses and vote for the “lesser of two evils.” They might know that the politician or policy they support contains elements that they are presumably against on general principle, but their ideology trumps truth, time and again. This is why it is crucial that harmful propaganda be used to supply and reinforce flawed ideology.

Harmful propaganda is created from and creates flawed ideologies (Stanley 4). Getting to the root, it *disrupts one’s ability to think critically* about *certain* information. This, I believe, is what Socrates means by saying that rulers might come to believe their own false proclamations, which may withstand even the most compelling arguments against them; similar to the way wool that is dyed remains so even after it is washed, flawed ideologies remain deeply embedded in the mind, resistant to the most obvious facts or blatant contradictions. Authorities or leaders come to believe their false ideologies to be true and so does the public which they *lead*. The “unrevisability” criterion disallows revision of certain held views that conflict with the status quo. “One main source of the unrevisability of certain beliefs is that they are connected to *social practices*. The beliefs are ones I need to have in order to remain in those practices” (p. 185). The network of ideologies one holds is intrinsically tied to the social practices of day-to-day life. The belief that some presently hold, for instance, that the current president of the United States was sent from Heaven by God Himself prevents them from accepting statements that deny that Trump’s been sent by God to save the world from “Mexicans taking our jobs” or “China taking over the world.” Those who support Trump presently are resistant to the facts that the narratives he puts forth bear little or no connection to reality, which is that masses of people are now dying throughout the world during what could potentially lead to the worst pandemic in history, the only viable way to decrease death and suffering is to provide basic sustenance needs (with the public’s money) and

allow people to “shelter in place,” all the while Trump is urging people to leave their shelters, return to work, and effectively, risk their lives so the machine may keep running.

Harmful propaganda is especially problematic within systems that profess to be the bastions of freedom when in practice they are not.

According to Stanley:

The most basic problem for democracy raided by [harmful] propaganda is the possibility that the vocabulary of liberal democracy is used to mask an undemocratic reality. If so, there could be a state that *appeared* to be a liberal democracy. It would be a state the citizens of which *believed* was a liberal democracy. (11)

For example, those educated in the United States are taught that it is “democratic” and “free;” furthermore, they are taught to believe that the opposite of a Liberal Democracy is neither “democratic” nor “free.” Such societies are commonly referred to as “authoritarian.” The phenomenon operates similarly in so-called “authoritarian” states, however. “It is utterly standard to mask the nature of an authoritarian regime with the use, for example, of revolutionary or socialist vocabulary” (Ibid.).

The same can be said about states referred to as Liberal Democracies or capitalist states. One may be led to believe that “democracy” is synonymous with “authoritarianism,” or, perhaps, that “communism” is synonymous with “authoritarianism,” depending on the sort of society in which they are educated. That was Orwell’s point in *1984*. It matters not *if* the states are what their leaders profess them to be. The consequences are virtually the same, namely, the interests of a

minority of the population, the wealthy and powerful classes, are served automatically with the aid of flawed ideology and harmful propaganda.

This is not to say, however, that violence or physical force are not employed in every state to correct for dissidence and revolts, but that it is not *always* necessary, especially in the so-called “free societies,” such as the Liberal Democracies. Historian, Liah Greenfeld, draws a similar conclusion in *Nationalism: A Short History*:

Although each of them would tend to see the other as false, both liberal and authoritarian democracies are genuine democracies, just as individualistic and collectivistic nationalisms are both genuine nationalism. (p. 87 Nationalism)

Green calls this a “transvaluation.” During a transvaluation, state propagandists, official or unofficial, “are likely to adopt new names for the resulting inverted values and turn the original nomenclature into derogatory terms” (Ibid). Anyone familiar with George Orwell’s *1984* will understand the concept of “double-speak.” World powers, although never on equal footing, might have opposing economic interests; nevertheless, they share “essentially the same worldview” (88, Greenfeld). This makes the double-speak so effective; it doesn’t matter what side of the road one’s on, the grass will always be less green on the other side. The opposing power is by definition “evil.” Thus, facts need not matter when one’s on the right side of the road.

In so-called “totalitarian societies,” Stanley finds, official, state-sponsored propaganda is not usually taken seriously (47). Therefore, if the state does say something true, it might not be believed. But, for the so-called “Liberal Democracies” the danger is that since official, state-sponsored propaganda is not allowed, *harmful propaganda might not be recognized as such*. Those

who constitute the liberal democracies fail to think critically about statements that might lead them to contradictions between the ideologies they hold and facts that show them to be false. Consequently, “Many people with flawed ideologies do not accept that their ideologies are flawed” (75). They believe, as Socrates says, that they know the truth although they do not (*Republic* 515c). Similar to Socrates’ subjects in the cave, they believe that the shadowy objects they perceive are tied to the statements that accompany them. It is not the public’s role to decide if their state is what they are taught throughout their lives, but merely to receive and accept that it is. Any deviation is perceived as “unnatural” since the “natural” public order is that which one is led to believe to be “natural.” This leads to the fallacy that the way things are in a society or culture are the way things ought to be. A challenge for the public in “free societies” or Liberal Democracies, therefore, is the recognition of propagandistic claims that are false and harmful from those that are not. (Stanley 47).

2.4 The Propaganda Model

In their book *Manufacturing Consent*, Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman describe a “propaganda model,” which they say is “an analytical framework that attempts to explain the performance of the U.S. media in terms of the basic institutional structures and relationships within which they operate” (Herman and Chomsky xi). They argue that “the media serve, and propagandize on behalf of, the powerful societal *interests that control and finance them*” (Ibid; my emphasis). To wit: “What journalists do, what they see as newsworthy, and what they take for granted as premises of their work are frequently well explained by the incentives, pressures, and constraints incorporated into such a structural analysis” (Ibid.). The news media make up a significant portion of US society’s intelligentsia, those who have an immense role in affecting

public opinion and thus “fixing the basic principles and the dominant ideologies” (xi, Herman; Chomsky). This segment of society, therefore, constitutes, in no small part, “guardians” of wealth and power. They effectively guard the public from realizing the truth that they are mere cogs in a machine, or *transient servants of wealth and power*.

Furthermore, they argue that in Liberal Democracies like the United States, the government does not need to rely solely on the use of force or physical coercion, far from it; for the mechanisms of control have been internalized by those who make up the institutions that have power over the disbursement of information and knowledge. The control over the dominant ideologies is further concealed in liberal democracies by the fact that a marginal amount of dissent is permitted to enter the field of discourse, but only insofar as it is kept within certain “bounds and at the margins,” unable to threaten dominant narratives (xii). To be sure, “it is much more difficult to see a propaganda system at work where the media are private and formal censorship is absent” (1). It is much easier, in a liberal democracy, for the media to control the narrative when they have a monopoly on the information and the mediums in which it is transmitted. Indeed, it is far easier to merely omit certain facts when it suits the desired narrative of wealth and power generally, or advertisers, investors, boardrooms, and shareholders specifically. Having a virtual monopoly on the dissemination of information, the “media are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public” (2). Are such mechanisms of control different from those Socrates advocates that the guardians employ to maintain order in the *Republic*? In models such as these, those who attempt to shed light on the lies or omissions of the dominant narrative will, at best, be ignored, or, at worst, made to drink the hemlock.

In a so-called “free society,” such as the United States, the shaping and constraining of media policy is done “by the selection of right-thinking personnel and by the editors’ and working journalists’ internalization of priorities and definitions of newsworthiness that conform to the institution’s policy” (Ibid.). Thus, the collective and overlapping values, beliefs, and ideologies of those who stand at the gates of power, so to speak, are baked-in. In a liberal democracy, effectively ruled by wealth and power, the management class, including media, dominates the narrative; they constitute, in no small part, the guardians of tradition, and ultimately, of the political order. In a word, they produce the messages that accompany the shadowy images projected on the wall of the cave.

While Chomsky and Herman target “news media” in their study, one of the institutions central to the formation of ideology in “free societies” nowadays, Socrates considered poetry to be the primary bearer of harmful propaganda in his day.

3.1 Ancient Greece: Internalization

In ancient Greece, “the principal vehicle for education was Homer” (Hadas 19). It was virtually “the Bible of the Greeks.” (71) Accordingly, the youth learned their “morals and religion through Homer and Hesiod” (361). Nikolaos Pappas says that “the poems of Homer and Hesiod accounted for nearly all of a young Athenian’s reading” (Pappas 66). Indeed, “Homer’s poems stood at the heart of a cultural education, and together with Hesiod’s poetry transmitted the essential elements of Greek religion” (Pappas 67). Yet prior to becoming “the general property of all Greece” (Mahaffy 138), the poems were first sung “in the halls of the palace” (Vernant 50). The most famous poems were initially used to entertain and educate the elite sectors of Ancient Greek societies; they were “preserved in family traditions as private tokens of power” (Vernant 51).

Furthermore, they were scrutinized by those with an interest in forming and influencing public opinion and culture.

Although the Ancient Greek poems did not always provide accurate historical accounts, many accepted their lessons as truth. There were those for whom “the poems, as they were recited, were both the truth itself and the evidence for their own truth” (Finley 22). They internalized values that were embedded in poetry, which served to maintain the existing political order. So that the political order might be sustained, Socrates said that the public, especially children, should be taught only “useful falsehoods.” The information they receive should be censored, which the guardians alone, having internalized the right values, having them “dyed” into their souls or minds, are equipped to do. They should be instructed in the stories that the rulers “think they should hold” (377b-c). Their consent, in other words, should be manufactured by the guardians. Those who are equipped to differentiate the well-told from the poorly-told falsehoods will persuade and instruct the rest. But this method of identifying “those who are equipped” is circular and leads to a Euthyphro problem. In Plato’s *Euthyphro*, Socrates asks his interlocutor Euthyphro:

“Is the pious being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods? (10a; Euthyphro)

If those “who are equipped” are chosen by those “who are equipped,” and if societies are susceptible to false ideologies, then how can one know who is and who is not naturally equipped to disseminate knowledge or truth? Furthermore, how could one know if anyone is equipped with such knowledge?

3.2 The United States and Value Internalization

The values that the “Founding Fathers” of the United States internalized were partially borrowed from romanticized notions of ancient Greek and Roman “civilization.” In *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life 1780-1910*, Caroline Winterer says:

Classical antiquity arrived in the New World with the Europeans. Though removed from the ancient Greeks and Romans by about two thousand years, Europeans of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries conveyed across the Atlantic a habit of venerating the glories of the classical world, of viewing the exoticism of the new within the framework of the old (10)

Accordingly, “education in the colonies reflected” the colonizers’ “preoccupation with antiquity, making the education of Christian gentlemen essentially synonymous with classical learning” (Ibid.). The “formal classical education” was integral to forming the values of each consecutive generation of rulers. Furthermore, the education that created the “gentlemen” was meant to distinguish the ruling few “from the masses” (Winterer 20). Yet this is not new, the US ruling classes have always had an interest in controlling the dominant narrative.

Stanley draws our attention to Edward Alsworth Ross’s 1901 book entitled, *Social Control: A Survey of the Foundations of Order*, which finds use of Socrates’ lessons concerning “social control.” Stanley characterizes the work as “an extended argument for the use of the educational system as the ideal mechanism of elite social control” (Stanley 277). Of all the ways that the ruling class may control public opinion and instill ideologies that mold people to effectively accept an

existing social order, Ross prefers education, which can fix “ ‘in the plastic child mind principles upon which, later, may be built a huge structure of practical consequence’ ” (Ibid.). Prior to becoming president, Woodrow Wilson was among those taken with Ross’s theories concerning social control. In a 1909 speech to the High School Teachers Association entitled, “The Meaning of Liberal Education, he said:”

We want one class of persons to have a liberal education, and we want another class of persons, a very much larger class, of necessity, in every society, to forego the privileges of a liberal education and fit themselves to perform specific difficult manual tasks. (Stanley 278)

Ross’ research continues to have “a deep and lasting influence on American education policy” (278).

Control over educational systems “amounts to control of the basic political dialectic,” says Stanley (237). This is reminiscent of one of Socrates’ key insights that if a city or state is to last through the ages, it must be the case that “the desires of the inferior many are controlled by the wisdom and desires of the superior few” (431d). The rulers must also “cling to education and see that it isn’t corrupted without their noticing it” (424b). They must, says Socrates, “supervise the storytellers” and censor things like history, the arts, and education accordingly (377b-c). Likewise, the education of the guardians too must, as Pappas says, mold “them into obedient patriots” (Pappas 70). Socrates says that the rulers and ruled should “all sing the same song together” (432a Republic). Everyone is in accord, “indeed the ruler and the ruled in any city share the same belief about who should rule” (431e). “Who should rule” is exemplified by whoever traditionally rules.

The existing conditions of society are deemed phenomena that are not only derived from Nature, but permanent or unchangeable. But if they were, then things would not change and could not be otherwise, but that is absurd.

4. Conclusion

As I have shown above, the conceptual scheme Socrates describes in Plato's *Republic* concerning the forming of public opinion through censorship may be characterized in terms of the propaganda model described by Chomsky and Herman. Thus, Pappas' suggestion that Socrates instructs of the usefulness of myths and lies "as any effective propagandist has to" is, under such analysis, accurate. Furthermore, Socrates "fashions this myth of the state out of elements that the Greek audience would have found familiar" (Pappas 72). The poems, or perhaps nowadays, the films, national myths, "official histories," news, music, video games, etc., therefore, must be censored accordingly – largely, however, by way of *self-censorship*, and through the internalization of certain values that substantiate flawed ideologies – which is especially worrisome in the "free societies." Socrates says, those who know better than everyone else what they do or do not need to know or believe *will censor themselves accordingly* (387b; my emphasis). Chomsky and Herman repeat this sentiment in the quotation above when they say that "news people, frequently operating with complete integrity and goodwill, are able to convince themselves that they choose and interpret the news 'objectively.' " (p. 2, above). In our present society, it is the journalists, politicians, teachers, filmmakers, philosophers, etc., who self-censor automatically, selecting for values that map onto those that ultimately serve wealth and power. History, furthermore, should be tailored accordingly and those knowledgeable about such matters will also delete certain famous

speeches (387d). Or in the case of reporters, as Herman and Chomsky find, they will merely omit certain facts or choose to discuss only those things that ultimately serve their financiers or masters.

4.1 A Way Out?

I have been discussing Socrates' theory of social control without the use of constant force as a thread tracing to the liberal democratic United States where the media "are effective and powerful ideological institutions that carry out a system-supportive propaganda function by reliance on market forces, internalized assumptions, and self-censorship, and without significant overt coercion" (306). But how are these systems of corruption, oppression, and domination changed? Chomsky says, the same way they've always been changed, through the "organization and *self-education* of groups in the community and workplace, and their networking and activism," which "continue to be the fundamental elements in steps toward the democratization of our social life and any meaningful social change" (Herman *et al*307). Philosopher and African American and feminist activist, Angela Y. Davis says, "freedom is a constant struggle." Freedom from indoctrination and social and political oppression and control, therefore, is a constant struggle.

The greatest and most effective moments constituting changes in US history – and any oppressive society – occurred when people were able to educate themselves and each other beyond the bounds of the dominant discourse. The "democratization of information *sources*," thus, leads to further democracy: public control over public resources, economics, and education, amongst other crucial things.

In 19th century Great Britain, for example, the "free" or "radical" press, which was controlled by working classes themselves, were able to help awaken public consciousness by

empowering them with information that was traditionally concealed. The worker-controlled press “unified the workers because it fostered an alternative value system and framework for looking at the world” (3). This new form of empowerment enabled the workers and poor and disempowered people to further organize and unify through a source of power that had been hidden under a set of harmful ideologies, which had previously disallowed them to perceive even their own chains.

One might consider that if the public become conscious of the truth about their history and thus imagine and create a world of *their collective* choosing, it might turn out that what they decided is best is no rulers at all.

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Boston, MA, December, 2019

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